

The state of the FIST

By SSG Christopher J. Grzecki, FA

During the last six years, fire supporters have deployed to the urban jungle of Iraq and conducted primarily nontraditional missions that infantrymen more commonly perform.

Meanwhile, the fire supporters who operated in the arduous mountains of Afghanistan probably have called for and adjusted more indirect fire rounds, close air support and close combat aviation in combat than they have in training. With the focus of our nation's military operations shifting rapidly to Afghanistan, the Advanced Leadership Course is, now more than ever, an essential stepping stone to become an effective combat leader in today's Army.

As a 13F small group leader at the Advanced Leadership Course at Fort Sill, Okla., I have taught almost 115 of my fellow comrades since early 2008. Since then, I have noticed a few disturbing trends. Though there are multiple reasons for it, but the one that burns my soul the most is the lack of basic fire support knowledge of my peers.

Do not mistake this strictly as a disparaging remark. I think the majority of the fault lies with the maneuver commands for not allowing field artillery Soldiers the opportunities to train. Through my observation, the most common reason for this is their commanders do not understand the need for lethal fires or the fact that fire support skills are indeed a perishable skill set. This, in my opinion, is due to a combination of three things — a lack of command experience in environments that require the use of indirect fires, the ever-growing realm of nonlethal fires and a lack of confidence in fire supporters to execute their missions safely and accurately.

Rectifying the trend. The opportunity to rectify this unnerving trend lies at the feet of the company fire support sergeant. The company fire support sergeant, also known as the company fire support team chief or company fire support NCO, has a link to the company commander, either directly or through his company fire support officer. This NCO's position has an enormous amount of responsibility. He is responsible for the fitness, health, welfare, morale, discipline and training of the company's fire supporters.

From my own personal experience and observations, a company fire support NCO has the opportunity and support to ensure he can meet all of his responsibilities — with the exception of training. Junior fire supporters most likely will receive training on maneuver tactics, close-quarters marksmanship, entering and clearing a room, detainee operations, information operations and civil affairs operations, but probably none will receive much needed training on fire support operations.

Likely, these junior fire supporters are assigned directly to their maneuver platoons and are counseled by those platoon sergeants or squad leaders. The company fire support NCO probably has to request time to train the fire support Soldiers from their respective platoon sergeants at the weekly training meeting. Gone are the days of taking your fire support Soldiers into the dayroom to grill them on *Field Manual 6-30 Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Observed Fire* all day. The question is, "How do company fire support NCOs use their link to the commander to address the degradation of skills resulting from lack of training time?"

Training the commander. It starts the first moment you and your commander interact. During those few minutes, one of the first



characteristics he likely will notice is self confidence. A company fire support NCO either has it or not — there is no gray area, no in-between. You either will ask for what you want or tactfully "tell" the commander how you intend to run your team. Asking how he wants you to do things indirectly lets him know that you do not have a clear, premeditated plan. How will a commander have confidence in you and your men's abilities to engage the enemy with indirect fires effectively and safely if you do not display that same confidence in yourself?

It won't be something that comes to you overnight. However, it can be built, not only through years of experience, but also through knowledge of fire support doctrine and Army regulations. It is the ability to stand up for what you know is right. That first moment of self confidence, or lack thereof, will set the tone for the remainder of the time that the two of you work together. Your company commander either will value everything you have to say or will "take it with a grain of salt" and undermine your every decision. Now that you have your commander's ear, what is the next step?

It is imperative to sell your product — lethal fires. Like anything else in this world, no one wants to buy something if they don't know anything about it. We must be passionate about fire support. We must take pride in our craft. We must explain, in as much detail as necessary, the overwhelming need for fire support.

We must describe indirect fire's ability to not only kill the enemy, but to control the enemy, to shape him, and to make him go where we want him to go — so the maneuver element can engage him decisively with direct fire weapon systems. We must teach the commander the value of close air support and close combat aviation and combining those assets with other indirect fire weapons. We must ensure that the commander understands that fire support wins wars.

But how do we do this if we don't have even the basic knowledge of a fire supporter? The answer is simply, you can't. You cannot even begin to accomplish any of these tasks without

this knowledge. If you don't have the answers, every attempt to convince your commander why he needs fire support will make you look like a fool. Worse, it will make your entire team and, likely, all fire supporters look like fools as well.

Training the fire support NCO. This is where the NCO Education System helps mitigate that lack of knowledge. The Advanced Leadership Course is more important than ever. Beginning in late 2008, fire support specialist small group leaders began looking at the program of instruction being taught at what was then known as the Basic NCO Course. We realized that the course material just "wasn't cutting it." Fire supporters left Fort Sill without all of the knowledge required to be a company fire support sergeant. We realized that we were failing our comrades.

We analyzed various surveys filled out by company fire support sergeants throughout the Army. We corresponded with the observer/controllers at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, La., the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., and the Joint Multinational Training Center in Hohenfels, Germany, about the biggest deficiencies they see among company fire support sergeants rotating through their areas. We have even tapped into our own small group leaders' personal experiences in combat and in garrison. Then, we worked with the fire support specialist writers and developers at the Fort Sill Field Artillery School Department of Training and Doctrine to rewrite the program of instruction.

Some of the new materials that have been added to the Fire Support Specialist Advanced Leadership Course are skill level one and two refresher classes, as well as graded tests. This is intended to ensure that all fire supporters, regardless of their past experience, leave the course with a basic knowledge base. We also have added fire support planning using the eight troop leading procedures, essential fire support task development, fire support night operations and target acquisition assets and capabilities.

We developed an open discussion forum on fire support equipment, tactics and lessons learned. This will be a continually evolving class that covers the different equipment and tactics being used throughout the force. As we all know, a fire supporter in the

SPC John Garner helps SSG Christopher J. Grzecki call for fire on enemy positions in Gowardesh, Afghanistan, June 21, 2006. (Photo courtesy of SSG Christopher J. Grzecki, U.S. Army)

10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, N.Y., most likely will not be using the same equipment and tactics as one from the 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas. This forum will allow students to learn from, not only their peers in class with them, but from those who came before them as well. The Advanced Leadership Course will become the hub for this invaluable information. They then will be able to take this previously unavailable knowledge back to their units with them and put it to good use.

Students attending the Advanced Leadership Course also will have a unique opportunity to use what is the Army's premier call-for-fire simulator, the Joint Fires and Effects Training System. This multimillion dollar system is only available at Fort Sill and dwarfs the call-for-fire trainers with which most of you are familiar. The Joint Fires and Effects Training System has three modules that can be linked together so that they are all looking at a common battlefield from different vantage points. This requires detailed coordination among the different observers. The scenarios either can be pulled from a batch of actual locations from around the world or built from scratch.

We also have developed a capstone practical exercise that incorporates everything the students have learned throughout the course and ties it into a simulated operation. Students will be broken into four groups, three acting as platoon forward observers and one as the company fire support team. The company fire support team will be given a company operations order and a battalion fire support annex D. They will be required to create a company fire support plan, brief their forward observers and then manage the "fight" from their company command post in another module known as the fires cell. Each group will rotate through all four modules to get the opportunity to act as a company fire support sergeant. Each group that rotates through will have a different scenario with an active enemy to fight.

All fire supporters and their commanders should feel confident that the latest program of instruction being taught at the Advanced Leadership Course will ingrain the knowledge required to perform the duties of a company fire support sergeant effectively. The knowledge gained through this step of the NCO Education System should be a stepping stone en route to gaining the confidence needed to train your Soldiers (and your future maneuver commanders) successfully. You must take what you learn in the Advanced Leadership Course or any other service school and continue to educate yourselves as well as your Soldiers.

The phrase "knowledge is power" has never been more applicable. The only way to achieve this knowledge is through education. As NCOs, we must set the example for younger Soldiers and not having an opportunity to train is not an excuse. We must show them that by educating ourselves, we are becoming armed with the knowledge and confidence to make the necessary changes — no matter what echelon we are working in. ■

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